Is Loneliness a Health Epidemic?

February 12, 2018

Last month, Britain appointed its first "[minister for loneliness](#)," who is charged with tackling what Prime Minister Theresa May called the "sad reality of modern life."

Public-health leaders immediately praised the idea — and for good reason. In recent decades, researchers have discovered that loneliness left untreated is not just psychically painful; it also can have serious medical consequences. Rigorous epidemiological studies have linked loneliness and social isolation to heart disease, cancer, depression, diabetes and suicide. Vivek Murthy, the former United States surgeon general, has written that loneliness and social isolation are "associated with a reduction in life span similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity."

But is loneliness, as many political officials and pundits are warning, a growing "health epidemic"?